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Instant spam: It's tough to swallow

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Instant messaging can be great for immediate and personalized online interaction, but it can also allow people to invade one's desktop with instant spam.

Full Text (476 words)

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Like many America Online subscribers, I love the Buddy List feature that allows me to hold impromptu desktop discussions whenever a client or colleague is online. Whether making plans for a business lunch or arguing about the pass interference call in last night's Lions game, instant messaging (IM) offers home-based workers both immediacy and personalized interaction.

Unfortunately, IM's convenience comes with a considerable price tag. Porn peddlers and get-rich-quick schemers have been flooding your e-mail box with worthless detritus for years. And if you have IM in place, these same folks can invade your desktop with instant spam.

I found this out a few weeks back when my PC chimed and an IM dialog box appeared on my screen. It was from a freelance writer looking for work. Annoyed that he used this channel to reach me, but trying to be civil, I encouraged him to contact me via my mailing address. His response: "Which magazine are you with?"

Huh? You're sending me an IM asking for work and you don't even know who I am or where I work? At first I didn't get it. But then it all made perfect sense.

This writer didn't know me from Tina Brown—he likely conducted a keyword search in the AOL membership directory for "editor" and sent his pitch letter to everyone on the list. It was instant spam. Targeted spam, no question, but creepy and invasive nonetheless. About a week later, I received another IM from someone wanting to know if I was interested in making some quick money—a tired and obvious spam scheme. And a female friend says she's received a handful of instant spam messages, too, including a comehither notice from a complete stranger seeking chat sex.

"It's very different from e-mail spam," says Kelly Looney, vice president of marketing of Activerse, which makes the IM software Ding! (www.activerse.com). "The person

knows when you're online and you get the feeling that they're watching you."

So is this the direction IM is headed? Not necessarily. Fully aware of the potential hazards of rampant, unsolicited IM, chat software manufacturers have provided strong filters that allow you to keep strangers away from your desktop. The only hitch: It's often up to you to make sure these blockades are armed and ready. The default setting in AOL, for instance, allows all 12 million AOL members—plus anyone else

who's downloaded the AOL Instant Messenger software—full access to your desktop. Activerse has a better system:

Prospective chat partners must request your permission before they can communicate with you via Ding!

If you're currently using IM software, make a point of learning its security ins and outs before you get bombarded with unwanted come-ons. And if you're just starting to get your feet wet with online chatting, pick a service that places as much emphasis on security and privacy as you do.



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